

Cut All the Stuff Readers Skip

The Source

Elmore Leonard's 2001 essay "Easy on the Adverbs, Exclamation Points and Especially Hoopedoodle" articulated his personal approach: "If it sounds like writing, I rewrite it." His Rule #10: "Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip."

Leonard was describing his own aesthetic - spare, dialogue-driven crime fiction. For his style and genre, this worked brilliantly. He stripped away description to focus on action and voice.

The principle was reasonable for Leonard's purposes: **In fast-paced crime fiction, excessive description can slow momentum.**

The Morphing

This became universal prescription:

1. **Original:** "For crime fiction, keep description economical"
2. **First corruption:** "Readers skip long descriptions"
3. **Second corruption:** "Any description over a few lines is 'hoopedoodle'"
4. **Third corruption:** "Literary description is self-indulgent"

5. **Final form:** "All fiction should be stripped-down and minimalist"

The rule became: **If it's not plot or dialogue, cut it. Description is padding. Atmosphere is showing off.**

This led to stripped prose becoming the only "legitimate" style, and anything richer being labeled as "purple prose" or "overwriting."

The Reality

Some of literature's greatest passages are what readers DON'T skip:

Cormac McCarthy (*Blood Meridian*): Pages of landscape description, violent and beautiful. The prose IS the point. "They rode on. They rode like men invested with a purpose whose origins were antecedent to them..."

Gabriel García Márquez (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*): Lush, detailed, magical descriptions of Macondo. The richness is what makes it memorable.

Donna Tartt (*The Secret History*, *The Goldfinch*): Extended passages of description, atmosphere, and reflection. Readers don't skip them - they luxuriate in them.

Marilynne Robinson (*Housekeeping*, *Gilead*): Meditative, descriptive prose that creates mood and meaning. The "hooptedoodle" IS what readers come for.

Annie Proulx (*The Shipping News*): Rich description of Newfoundland landscape and culture - essential to the novel's atmosphere.

Michael Chabon (*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*): Elaborate descriptions of Golden Age New York, magic tricks, comic book creation - the richness is the pleasure.

Vladimir Nabokov (all novels): Luxuriant description and linguistic play. Readers who want stripped prose should read other writers.

When Sparse Prose Works

Stripped-down style succeeds when:

1. **Genre demands pace:** Thrillers, crime fiction, action-oriented stories
2. **Voice requires it:** Working-class narrators, terse characters
3. **Style is consistent:** Minimalism as deliberate aesthetic (Carver, Hemingway)
4. **Subject is harsh:** Spare prose for spare circumstances
5. **Dialogue-driven:** Fiction where talk carries the story

When Mandatory Cutting Fails

Forcing minimalism fails when:

1. **Atmosphere matters:** Gothic, historical, fantasy need rich description
2. **Style is part of content:** Lush prose for lush lives (Fitzgerald, Tarrt)
3. **Reflection serves theme:** Meditative fiction requires space for thought
4. **Beauty is the point:** Some fiction celebrates language itself
5. **World-building requires it:** SF/fantasy need detailed description

Example of what "readers skip" according to the rule:

"The light at that hour was the color of honey, thick and golden, pouring through the old glass windows that had been in the house for a century. Dust motes drifted in the beams like tiny suspended worlds, each one lit from within."

According to the rule, this should be cut. But readers who love this kind of prose don't skip it - they savor it.

The Actual Principle

The real craft principle isn't "cut all description" - it's:

Match your prose density to your material, genre, and intended audience. Readers who choose dense literary fiction expect and enjoy rich description. Readers who choose fast-paced thrillers

want economy. Know your audience and serve them accordingly.

Or more simply: **Different readers want different experiences. Write for your readers, not against them.**

Consider:

- **Crime fiction readers** generally want pace and dialogue (Leonard was right for his audience)
- **Literary fiction readers** often want rich prose and reflection
- **Fantasy readers** need world-building description
- **Literary thriller readers** (Donna Tartt, Marisha Pessl) want both density and momentum

The Irony

Leonard's rule became dogma precisely when "big book" literary fiction was thriving - *The Goldfinch*, *A Little Life*, *The Overstory*, all over 700 pages with rich, detailed prose. Readers demonstrably didn't skip these books - they became bestsellers.

The supposed "short attention span" of modern readers was disproven by the success of dense literary fiction and epic fantasy.

Why This Corruption Matters

This rule damages fiction by:

1. **Homogenizing prose:** All fiction becomes stripped and minimalist
2. **Devaluing language:** As if beautiful prose is frivolous
3. **Limiting subject matter:** Some stories need rich description
4. **Genre prejudice:** Assumes crime fiction aesthetics apply to all fiction
5. **Insulting readers:** Assumes they can't appreciate anything but bare bones

Most destructively, it teaches writers that **readers are impatient philistines** who can't appreciate language - when actually different readers want different experiences, and many readers specifically choose books for rich prose.

The actual challenge is knowing your audience and your genre, and writing the density of prose that serves both.

Leonard was right for Leonard. He wasn't right for everyone.